

Episode 15: Rex Tyrannus

Abigail, as the preroll: Hello hello hello! This is just a heads up that Back Again, Back Again will be taking a midseason break after this episode - we'll be back the first of august. In the meantime, though, the Back Again, Back Again spinoff is making its debut!

Sword and Spinner takes places in the years between the first soldier, poet, king and the one Ilyaas is wrapped up in - it's about one very disgruntled *gladicus* from the Far Shore and their bard, Lila, sorting out problems in towns too far away for the kings to care about. I've stolen the voice of one of my favorite people in the world to play Lila - Chloe Peterson, of course - and they've put together some absolutely SICK music for it. So - while Ilyaas processes her emotional turmoil, give that a listen :)

But that's been me rambling long enough. As you can tell by this episode timestamp, it's already a doozy. I'll see you at the end.

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode fifteen: rex tyrannus.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I'm awful for that, dear listeners. I know. I know. I've gotten better about it, though - did you notice? That word. Kiss. I can say it now without flushing - and whether or not that's because it didn't mean as much this time is irrelevant. This kiss - see, easy to say - was a way to shut him up and a way to distract him and a way to hopefully, hopefully, get enough in his head to soften him to the idea of cooperation with us. It was also, definitely, certainly, a manipulation.

It didn't mean a thing. Do you hear me, dear listeners? It did not mean a thing.

Ha-ha. It worked, though. Somewhat. Mostly. That kiss accomplished three of those four things.

He softened, eyes going wide and losing their steel. I guess kisses meant more to him than me.

You came back, he said again, but this time he sounded like he believed it.

I did, I said, and hardened my heart. *But I won't lie to you, Cassian. I don't want to see Leander dead.*

It was a little bit remarkable, how much one kiss changed the way he looked at me. This was, again, almost the way it used to be - I kept catching glimpses of him of us of what-we-were-had-been-would-never-be that made it hard to maintain my resolve. Long-term, outside of this moment of reminisce, my two options were *turn him* or *kill him*. Even if that was not the goal of this mission when speaking broadly; even if I was the only one that still believed that the former was an option, that was what I had. I prayed for the former. I tried not to think about the latter.

If I ask you for honesty, he said, *would you give it to me?*

If I gave you honesty, I responded, *would you listen?*

He opened his mouth, but I held up a hand to cut him off. *Even if you don't like the answers? Would you listen, or would you talk over me with everything that's still in your head?*

He breathed in, deep, brow furrowing. *If you listen in return.*

An open dialogue, I said. *We should have had this ages ago.*

And yet you left.

And yet the second you heard something you didn't like, you locked me in my room and - I almost finished that sentence with took out Rhia's eye. But that would have been a little too much honesty, and no matter what we both sat claiming, there was only so much truth we could take. I needed him to trust me. - and completely shut me off, I finished lamely.

He tilted his chin, just slightly. But I trusted you to here. Even though you said you would come back once she was safe.

Here's my first truth, I said. Those words left your mouth. Not mine. It took me time to decide what I wanted.

Hm. Cassian picked up his mug and ran a finger around the rim of the glass. You said you would give me honesty. There is a word for what you are doing right now - a lie from - omission?

Omission, I corrected, before I could stop myself. He smiled, then, maybe the first real one since we'd gotten here - a little bit crooked and a little bit sad.

Yes. Omission. Do not - skirt around the truth, Ilyaas.

I'd taught him that phrase. Skirt around something. He'd laughed harder than I'd thought strictly necessary around skirt being used as a verb. Another good memory, thrown back up in my face. Was it the kiss that made him like this? Or was it both of us just lashing out in the most passive way possible, trying to

hurt with a combination of nostalgia and friendship and things now broken?

But I couldn't give him any of what he was asking. Especially not my reasons for returning. *Why did I come back? Well, dear Cassian, to kill you or steal our poet or force you into a deal. Which one of those options sounds least volatile to you? None of the primary reasons were because I missed you.*

I did what he'd said. I skirted around the question. *How many each?* I said instead. *Whole and uninterrupted truths?* We'd played this game before for silly things, a way to pull embarrassing childhood stories out of each other. It was how I learned why he was missing the very tip of his left ear (his first time cutting his own hair short at twelve, a little too frantically and done by candlelight that barely staved off the dark and definitely did not light his reflection well in the mirror). It was how he knew about the only time I'd gotten knocked out in *this* world (dodgeball to the face, fourth grade, gym class. I'd been cowering in the corner and trying to recount the plot of my library book to pass the time when I'd looked up to find I was the only one left. To the cheering of my classmates, I tried to go to the front for a ball. To the dismay of my classmates, I'd instantly gotten beamed and woke up with thirteen nine-year-olds staring back at me. Some hero, even

then). Why not repurpose our game for here, for this? Make our difficulties something familiar.

That smile, again. *How many truths? Three.*

There was an implied *you know why* there. It was always three's with us. *Rex et poeta et soldat.*

Who first? I asked, though we both knew the rules. Whoever brought up the game was first to confess. *What's your question?*

He brought his mug up towards his lips but did not drink. Steadily, he asked, *Why do you actually think Leander is the poet?*

I gaped. This was not the question that I'd expected - most of my brain had been trying to draw together enough half-truths about my leaving to satisfy him. This one caught me off guard.

Well, I began, starting with the easiest first. *The veins in their wrist. Where you can see it. Theirs were gold. Accept or reject?*

He frowned, nearly imperceptibly. *Reject. They could easily fake it - or it is remnants of magic. There's lots of remnants of magic in this world, Ilyaas. It doesn't make them special. And prophecies -*

I know what you think of prophecies - I cut in.

This time, he didn't try to hide his frown. *And you think differently?*

I let my eyes go wide. *Make that your second question.*

Don't answer, then. That's an answer in itself. But you owe me more.

We'd never played with empirical measurements, but our standards for empiricism didn't seem to match anymore. *Obvious* to me did not constitute *obvious* to him. *Well - you heard them sing.*

Something odd crashed across Cassian's face, and he leaned back in his chair, folding his arms to try to disguise it.

And?

And you - I wanted to grind my teeth together in frustration. This game - prod until you're satisfied - was a lot more fun when it was stupid questions. I needed my turn. And you seemed to hear it, okay? Have you ever heard anything like that? You looked fucking entranced, Cassian. And I thought we'd felt the same way about them.

He went quiet. That odd thing flickered again, reserved to the crinkling around his eyes, this time, and there was something just familiar enough about it that I think I caught - fear? Disillusionment? Regret? In his face, in his body. Maybe I didn't know, after all.

That's enough, he said, gruffly. *That's enough. I'm satisfied.*

Well - I snapped. Did you?

He didn't hesitate. *Maybe they are magic. But that doesn't make them chosen. They ran, Ilyaas. I saw. You went to talk to them, that night of the feast, and they saw you and what it would mean to be chosen and they ran rather than risk facing it. There is a difference between a talented bard and a prophecy child. This is why prophecies are archetypes and not assignments. Io did not run.*

So because they ran they deserve to die? I shot back, but he smiled crookedly and held up a hand.

Make that your second question, he mimicked, and I nearly snarled.

What?

My turn, again. You asked a question and I answered honestly. Are you satisfied with the answer I gave?

No, and this time, it was more of a snarl than a word. No, I'm not. That wasn't my fucking question.

You seem to like that word. He traced his finger through a puddle of spilled beer on the table. It was something Io would have done, that feigned haughty indifference, and that just made me angrier. I was not supposed to be angry here. I was not supposed to lose control like this.

What word? I said, then cursed, again, *fuck*, as he smiled and raised an eyebrow. *It's not my turn. That's not my question.*

Are you satisfied? He repeated, and I was too flustered to tear apart his answer for more.

Sure, I snapped. *Your turn.*

Silence. For another small eternity. It was enough time for me to get my head back under control - when had he learned to get under my skin like this? I didn't remember being so volatile around him - but maybe I always was. Maybe this time I just couldn't channel it into something like love.

Did you mean it? He finally asked, and was quiet for a second too long. I nearly laughed aloud - and did, just a bit, before biting it down.

I don't know what you mean. There were too many things one of us had said or done that had been left untouched out of fear or anger or embarrassment.

Before you - and here, I realized, much later, just like how I had cut off my *took out Rhia's eye*, he was skirting around the phrase *knocked me out*. See? We continued the trend. Fear and anger and embarrassment and tense, tense silence. *Before we fought*, he finished, just as lamely as I had, *the night we announced Io. You said that I was not the king.*

That's not a question, Cassian, I sighed, but already felt my throat closing at where this was going.

Did you mean it when you said you do not believe that I am the king?

I shut my mouth, scrambling to try and find an answer that would not make me lose my last questions - I'd wasted my first one on a stupid technicality, and according to a wine-drunk rule I'd made that he'd held to every time since the first it was used against him, if I couldn't make him think I was being honest, I got no more questions.

I believed it at the time, I said, and he didn't hesitate.

Reject.

I wasn't done, I'd said, although I'd hoped rather impossibly that we would be. I switched to Rhysean, hoping to play it off, and said, casually, faroc le seans rex. Do you remember this trick, listeners? I believe you are - king. No article. A king? The king? Up for debate. Up for interpretation.

Reject, he said, again, without even letting me get the last of my words.

Cassian, I snapped, frustrated.

A versus the, he said, and I groaned. Did you think that I hadn't run every conversation we've had over in my mind, Ilyaas? How you and I came to two different conclusions leaving this tavern? That was the only thing I could come up with. It was in Rhysean. And you think in English.

The implied - and just like in your language, there is a difference to you between the two.

He settled me with an even look. *Honesty. Or you lose your questions.*

He'd picked up habits when I was gone - little things, from Io, little things, from having to become greater on his own. I had, too. Or - I'd just spent a lot of time thinking about how to try and still save him. Even if what I said to lure him in was a bit of a lie.

I think at your core, you are good, Cassian. I do believe that you could save the world.

The tiniest, tiniest flicker of a smile across his face. *You do.*

Don't fish for compliments. I rolled my eyes, trying to lighten my voice, and kicked at his legs under the table.

That's an odd phrase. That was exactly what he'd said when he'd learned *skirt around the question. Define it, for me. For old time's sake.*

I indulged him. *It's - you know. It's like - Don't ask for more than you're worth.*

Fish for compliments. I fish for compliments. I am fishing for compliments, he mused, running tenses through his mind. He cocked his head. *And how much am I worth, Ilyaas?*

There it was - my name in his mouth in the old way. Rounded out and rolling and Rhysean. Warm.

Is that your third question, Cassian? I asked, but there was no venom in it. I mirrored his expression. *Careful, careful.*

It's not my turn, he parried. *It doesn't count.*

Mine then. Where is Leander?

He raised an eyebrow, stiffening, and a little of the earned ease disappeared from the way he sat. *Right to the matter of it.*

Rejected, I lilted, trying not to let my temper get the better of me.

They are safe.

For now. But not for long, as you made a big point of announcing. Rejected.

Safe from the rest of the world - he clarified. *At the palace.*

My eyes widened. *In the cellars? But they - burned.*

You mean, you burned them? He held up a hand. *That is not my question. It is -* a thick Rhysean word that I'm sure was something along the lines of *rhetorical*.

And you still haven't answered mine truthfully, I said, swallowing the hard edge in my voice. *Look, a bit of honesty for free, Cassian - I don't want to see them hurt. No matter what. It's - that's too much. I can't stand with you if you do that. Not now. Not ever. And that's what you really want to know, isn't it?*

Cassian's mouth fell open and shut, open and shut. Finally - *the throne room*, he admitted. *They are fine. They are not being hurt, Ilyaas.*

It was one of the most secure places in the palace, and as long as the royal family wasn't actively using it. Why not put a hostage there?

I let my eyes wander. In one of the booths behind us, a boy rose, carefully counting out coins onto the table, and swept out the door. *For now*, I said, trying to keep his attention on me. *Tomorrow is a different story.*

That's not fair, he protested.

There's nothing fair about their death, I snapped. *Banish them. Keep them locked up. Never let me see them again. I don't care, if it means they are safe. That's what I wanted to know. Safe only counts as an answer if it means will keep being safe.*

I never realized how much of an idealist you are, he said.

No one asked me to make difficult choices when I was young, I said. *Don't make me start now.* Before he could think too much on that, or what I'd gotten out of him, I cut in, *your turn.*

Silence. For a long, long time.

Your turn, I said again. *Cassian. Your question.*

He didn't look up at me, and the three words came out in a rush. *Will you stay?*

My mouth fell open, just the tiniest bit. *That's not a fair question.*

Any three, he said. *The rules of the game. Any three answered honestly.*

I don't - I stopped. At some point in my stupor, he'd started staring again. The sort of calculating that I knew meant he'd be able to catch my lie. I knew his face too well. He knew mine. *I don't* - I - I bit the inside of my cheek. *I don't know. Right now.*

Reject, he said softly.

I wasn't done, I protested. *I don't know. Right now. So - forfeit my other question. That's fine. I don't know right now, but - take me home. With you.*

And there it was - the breaking point. Two roads crossed and gave their travelers the chance to walk side by side. Cassian offered me a hand, and I didn't let myself hesitate before taking it.

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We did not go immediately back to the ruined palace. I drew him aside into an alley, just out of the light of the lanterns and the street, and pushed him against the wall. His hand flew to his sword, panic crossing his face for the briefest of seconds, before I kissed him again, hard, cupping his chin in my hands.

Cassian looked a different sort of panicked but mostly just very very smug after that. I asked, *for old times' sake? Can we see the city?* And like hell he would have refused, after that, so through the city we went, ducking in and out of taverns and wheeling through the night market, marveling at curios and me - of course - at the food. He bought me sugar scones. I didn't stop him.

The night grew late - later - until despite my insistence to drag out the evening, he pulled me back toward the palace - *ruined palace for a ruined king* - the two of us stumbling up the grand front steps. I pretended to be tipsier than I was. I pretended I didn't notice that people were staring. I pretended not to realize that that was, likely, his intention. I was not the only one that could be manipulative.

But once inside - that was the important part. For me to perform, at the time, and for you, listeners, now, to understand.

We were in the castle - in his room, back up in his room, playing cards on the bed as I tried to work up the nerve for my grand speech, my *what-if-you-just-heard-the-rebels-out-Cassian?* version of a last-ditch effort, and trying not to look at the Book of Prophecy sitting quietly on his desk. I wasn't paying any attention to my hand. I lost, and lost again, and then, just as I had almost found my nerve -

Io, Cassian muttered, but it was more to himself. *He should have been back by now.*

I started. *Io's here? Why didn't you tell me?*

Internally, I cursed. Of course he was. Because what had led me here?

Stories. Stories of a prince waiting.

How stupid I was.

Cassian was many things, but a storyteller was not one of them. Those were *Io's* words. *Io's* ideas, to draw me in.

What had the shopkeepers said? *A ruined palace for a ruined king.* Those were poet's words - even a mediocre bootlicking poet could pull a decent one-liner. I'd gotten too caught up in Cassian. I was always too caught up in Cassian - and I'd forgotten his essential pale shadow. *Io* from the Far Shore. His - poet.

Should have been back from what? I asked, when he didn't respond. My voice rose before I could quell it. *Cassian? Should have been back from what?*

He pushed himself off his bed and onto his feet. Halfway to the door, me directly behind him, the door flung open, and *Io* from the Far Shore, spitting curses, staggered in. He clutched at his shoulder - almost in a parallel to where I'd been stabbed months ago, a dagger hilt protruded. Blood blossomed across the front of his suit.

The false poet, he growled, eyes on Cassian. Their friends-
And then he caught me.

You, he spat, and he wrenched his free hand from his
injured shoulder and flicked his wrist, hard. A sizable knife
shot into it, and he was coming at me.

Found out. Found out. I'd been found out. I stumbled
backwards, slamming into the bedframe, and lunged towards where
I'd propped my sword, sheathed, by Cassian's door - you can't
sit on a bed with a sword on, listeners, and I'd been trying not
to be suspicious - but this proved to be a problem. Cassian
caught my movement and then me, one hand clawing around my
wrist. I yanked his grip off and reached the sword - I pulled it
from the sheath - and Cassian sucked in a breath.

Liar, he said, under his breath, and somehow it was said
with just as much vehemence as when Haast called me *killer*.
Because, of course, in my panic, I'd forgotten how we'd swapped
out swords, Callia with mine, me with Iolo's, Iolo, two blades
not one. I had made a promise that day - *I am coming back* - but
it had not been to Cassian.

I meant what I said, Cassian, I breathed into the low space
between us. *Come with me. Work with us.*

Us, Io hissed, and laughed. King, do you hear this? Us. I
told you. I told you, I told you, I -

Quiet - Cassian snapped. Ilyaas -

You were a distraction, king, Io hummed. Her friends have freed the false poet Leander Feldrea. You fell, and fell, and fell - I said, I said not to trust her -

Io - Cassian pleaded.

Don't worry, Io finished, and coughed, a wet and bloody sound. I killed one of the ones that came to free them. Knife through her back. His eyes hardened, and my hands tightened around the grip of my sword. Let me do the same to her.

Is it true? Cassian asked, but there wasn't much question in it. That's why you asked where they were. Not as a condition to come back. As another way to leave.

I said I wouldn't let them die, I said. I can't. I won't. And because this was a good of a time as any, this was the only chance I would maybe ever have again - This is not the person you have to become, Cassian. Hear them out - the fretim. They - we - want to remake Rhysea. I know you do, too. I know it. This does not have to become a war.

Silence for a long minute, save for Io's ragged breaths. I stared, and stared -

I don't think I know you anymore, he said, finally. I don't know why you think that burning this world is the only way to fix it. He raked a hand through his hair. Go, then, Ilyaas. See where that will get you - trying to raze our country. Rising from the ashes is a myth. You cannot come back from nothing.

King - Io balked.

Cassian held up a hand. If you will not stay, don't stay. But know that does make us enemies. And I will end those who stand against the crown.

I swallowed, hard. I'll have to kill you first, then, I thought, thinking back on my promise to Callia. I couldn't do it yet. I couldn't make myself do it yet, not when - fuck me for still thinking of him like this - he was letting me go. He was letting me leave, one more time. One last time. That's fine, I said instead. That's just fine.

I backed out of the room. And then I started running.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at patreon.com/backagainpodcast, where you'll gain access to bloopers, annotated transcripts, episode sneak-peeks, and more. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigaillelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that this world always tries to make you feel more alone than you truly are. There are people out there that will love you without condition or expectation, and you will find them. The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. You are so, so very loved.

I hope you have a wonderful day.